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ABSTRACT

Newly passed legislation and greater assertion of rights of minority groups have made the provision of special services to meet the needs of all students, specifically the advantaged and disadvantaged, a societal expectation in Canada. Although those needing special attention for any kind and number of exceptionalities has greatly increased, the present policies and present practices, despite newly passed more enlightened legislation, are still inadequate. To remedy the errors of past and present special education practices, action needs to be taken on several fronts--the ministries, the school boards, the teacher federations, and the faculties of education. Among the developments which need to be faced are greater interagency and interfaculty cooperation, more extensive training and education in special education for all teachers, and provision and delivery of adequate support personnel and services.
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REACTING OR RESPONDING TO THE
SPECIAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

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REACTING OR RESPONDING TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

In attempting to meet the educational needs of the advantaged and the disadvantaged, we are immediately faced with two problematic situations. First, who are they and how are their needs special? Secondly, how can we meet their educational needs without trying to meet other needs, inextricably interwoven with the former, as well?

How we face and solve situations is often determined by a combination of situational and personal factors. The latter are usually firmly rooted in our value system. In order to spare you the effort of deducing my viewpoints, biases possibly, I take the liberty of placing them squarely and publicly before you. No need to dredge them up from the mire of academic jargon or the maze of hidden agendas.

In no specific order or priority I consider that:

- (i) All learners are special.
- (ii) At certain stages some have special needs compared to others.
- (iii) Learners with special needs are not necessarily ill, deprived, or depraved.
- (iv) Schooling creates special needs when expecting the impossible.
- (v) Special needs are often not met because they are undetected, ignored, or opposed.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The International Year of the Disabled draws our attention, to an increasingly visible growing minority of our citizenry. Whereas Thunder Bay last summer witnessed how Terry Fox had to abandon his Marathon of Hope, this summer the city welcomes athletes from all across Canada to participate in the Summer Games. The contrast is striking: the physically abled and advantaged this year, the physically disabled and disadvantaged last year. What is less obvious is what they have in common. Qualities such as courage, perseverance, determination so often publicly admired in our athletes, were no less present in the heroic effort which Fox so exemplary demonstrated.

A tendency exists to less frequently associate such characteristics with the disadvantaged and disabled. Race, during a recent visit to Thunder Bay on behalf of the Workman's Compensation Board, was cited by McLaughlin (1981) to have said:

....it was common 'knowledge' that physically disabled people are also mentally or socially disabled.... the implication that disabled people are inferior is very strong.... rights extend beyond wheelchair access to public buildings; they entail equality in the public eye. The public must realize the potential that lies within the disabled population and learn to accept and utilize it.

Statements such as this remind us to treat the disadvantaged fairly, not condescendingly by rather awkwardly attempting to respond to their needs. Minority groups other than the disabled who are physically disadvantaged, equally call for justice, not pity.

Banding together, the disadvantaged insist on their rights. Organizations such as The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, The Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded, The Council for Exceptional Children and various others were formed by people coming together during a time of common needs. In so doing they not only created public awareness of their plight but they also began to lobby. Eventually they exerted sufficiently enough political pressure to set a legislative process into motion for the protection and extension of their rights.

Initially, permissive legislation came into being enabling school boards, if they so wished, to more adequately meet the needs of their exceptional students. Sooner or later this was followed by mandatory legislation, except for a few jurisdictions which still anticipate such legislation.

The American Federal Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1973 (Public Law 94-142) was a landmark decision in educational legislative history for disadvantaged students. Another one was The Education Amendment Act of 1980 (Bill 82) passed in the Ontario Legislature half a year ago, on December 2.

Both acts mandate adequate provisions for the education of exceptional students: programs and services to suit their needs upon early and ongoing identification of those needs. Harvey (1978: 235) cites the following among the major requirements of Public Law 94-142 in the U.S.A.

- (i) guarantee of due process procedures;
- (ii) provision of non-discriminatory testing and evaluation;
- (iii) maintenance of an individualized education program (I.E.P.) for each handicapped child.

Ontario school boards according to Bill 82 must

- (i) implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of pupils;
- (ii) provide appropriate special education programs and services;
- (iii) establish identification, placement and review committees (I.P.R.C.);
- (iv) appoint an inability to profit by instruction committee (I.P.I.C.);
- (v) refer matters to a special education appeal board (S.E.A.B.) when requested to do so;
- (vi) refer matters to a Special Education Tribunal upon application.

Note that the Act requires of boards to identify learning abilities (underlining mine) and that no costs are to be incurred by the applicants: parents, guardians or students of majority age in pursuit of their perceived rights.

A possible implication is that teachers, consultants, administrators and trustees may increasingly be held accountable for the degree of care with which they execute their newly legislated responsibilities. What has increasingly become evident regarding protection against bodily harm may eventually also apply regarding

protection against educational harm. Professional liability is on the increase as Rogers (1981: 30) pointed out:

As human experience accumulates and as our careers become more and more channelled into chosen areas of expertise it seems reasonable to expect a higher level of competence of all professionals. This, plus the growing public attitude of 'someone must pay', will result in an ever increasing standard of care demanded of those engaged in education.

One administrator in Ontario was cited by Buckle (1981) to have said that Bill 82 would burden taxpayers and take away from programs for typical children. Others however suggest that, although implementation costs might be higher than at first was anticipated, it depends also very much on how school boards are going about implementing the special education provisions of Bill 82.

For those who fought so long and arduously to gain recognition for the needs of special students, an important victory was won with the passage of Bill 82. No matter how legally and economically successful they have been, it will remain a rather hollow victory unless those responsible for implementing the legal provisions now in place, do so with concern, care, and sensitivity. They must not only be just and equitable but also appear to be so.

How important teachers' commitment to the spirit of the law is, is clearly illustrated by the words of Dr. Samuel Laycock (1963: 49) when in his Quance Lecture, almost two decades ago, he observed:

In the education of exceptional children, as in the education of normal children, the teacher is the key factor. In the last analysis,

so far as education goes, the classroom teacher carries the ball. That a certain province or school system has special services for the mentally retarded, the gifted, the crippled, the hard-of-hearing, or the emotionally disturbed means little in itself. Even impressive buildings and equipment may not be sufficient. It is the quality of the teacher and her relationships with her class that count.

Relationships are difficult to legislate, we can only formalize them. As Harry Passow (1979: 455) commented with regard to the advantaged:

For far too long, education of the gifted and talented has lacked a real commitment on the part of educators and lay persons alike.... the growing commitment to the development of the total range of abilities and talents because it is the right and necessary thing to do suggests that the future of education of the gifted, and talented is brighter than it has been in the long history of concern for society's most able and talented individuals.

The implications are clear. Societal expectations plus individual commitment are both necessary to meet the educational needs of the advantaged and disadvantaged. Awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of exceptional students is a societal, professional and personal obligation.

For those who work for and in the schools this means catering to unique and individual needs as much and as often as possible since, as Frank Laycock (1979: 95) wrote:

Once a society decides that it owes each child an education suited to optimal development, then a common pattern of schooling for all will be grotesquely ill-matched to uncommon children.

This is as true for teachers who teach these children in the classrooms as it is for all other "teachers" who will have to deal with them, such as consultants, speech therapists, nurses, social workers, psychologists and many others playing some contributing role in the identification and learning processes.

EXTENDED EXCEPTIONALITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

One of the problematic situations referred to at the beginning was who the advantaged and disadvantaged were and how they were exceptional. Over time, the categories appear to have increased rather than decreased. As was observed in the CELDIC Report (1970: 45) "Exceptionality is a culturally relative concept."

Despite a dwindling school population, however paradoxically this often may seem to the public, school costs as well as demand for special services are on the increase. Medical advances have contributed to an ever increasingly larger population of those needing special services. Moreover, societal changes have compounded this fact.

We included for example rural, female, and native students: an extension far beyond those to whom Dr. Laycock addressed himself. Moreover, particularly in the larger urban areas of Canada, increasingly reflecting the Canadian mosaic, ethnic -, in addition to native students are expecting certain special provisions as their rights.

Parents in Ontario, who wish to have their children taught the language of their country of origin, or, of that of their ancestors,

may receive such instruction provided by the school boards under the Heritage Language Program. This is usually taught after school or on week-ends. Funded on a continuing education basis, it nevertheless enables both boards in Thunder Bay to teach several languages.

The public board presently provides Mandarin, Hindi, Finnish, Ukrainian, Portuguese and Greek whereas the separate board offers Italian, Polish, Ukrainian and Croation. For a city of 113,000 the teaching of almost ten languages over and above English and French clearly illustrates what impact government policies of biculturalism and multiculturalism have had.

There is another side to this rather happy story however. For some time now the interface between intellectual and cultural exceptionalities has bemuddled, perplexed and bedevilled some teachers and administrators. It was not all that long ago that Loren Lind (1974: 92), in his account of Toronto school practices, cited the following words from the Trefan Court mothers:

What we are increasingly led to think is that the school system -- with opportunity class as its dead-end division -- just isn't set up to be meaningful for our kids. It doesn't relate to the things they know about and care about.... so the kids slide away and turn their minds and hearts off. And many of those who turn off the most end up in opportunity class.

Apparently the picture has not changed as drastically as we may have been led to believe. All minorities, whether for economic or for cultural differences, have reason to believe that their children do not get a fair deal from the school to which they send

them. Equating "different" with "deficient" is still a common practice as was found by Samuda and Crawford (1980: 240) in a government-funded Ontario Research Project:

Board policy and institutional practices in a significant proportion of cases tend to place the reception, placement and programs for minority students under the rubric of special education, thus tending to perpetuate the attitude that if a student is different (culturally) he is therefore academically inferior.

Except for the outmoded equation of special education with the special needs of academically disabled students, there is no doubt a clear message in this citation. Although those needing special attention for any kind and number of exceptionalities has greatly increased, our present policies and certainly our present practices, despite newly passed more enlightened legislation, are still inadequate for the task we face.

PAST AND PRESENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Our present inadequate practices are not entirely new. Both the CELDIC (1970: 42) and SEEC (1971: 14) Reports point to the dangers of over-simplification and the tendency to think in pathological and remedial terms rather than in differential terms when dealing with the student population that has special needs. The former states:

.....our diagnostic labels are based on the deficits in the child but rarely tell us anything about his strengths.

and in an attempt to get away from such a model, the latter suggests:

.....using a behavioural model.... it is clear that various types of exceptional children may have deficiencies in different areas. An alternative way of viewing the problems of exceptional children comprehensively is by means of a model based on the concept of communication.

Fortunately some improvement is reflected in Ontario Ministerial policy making. In H.S. 1, 1979-81, a policy document for the education of secondary school students, it is clearly stated on page 1 that:

An exceptional student may be gifted or may have learning problems. With respect to the secondary school program, exceptional students are those who have physical, intellectual, communicative (underlining mine) or behavioural differences, to such a degree that they require special curriculum services.

At the same time, the Ministry apparently deemed it necessary to reinforce and explicitly clarify what that meant in practice. In a most recent memorandum (1980-81: 30) of April 14, this year, it is re-emphasized that:

Special education.... refers to the provision of special education programs and special education services at all four levels of difficulty..... students should not be unduly influenced into taking all courses at a single level.

The latter admonition clearly refers to an ongoing practice of channelling exceptional students into basic or modified programs rather than general or advanced levels of difficulty which, in some cases, might more adequately serve their special needs. Worse

practices than these however continue to exist. The mismatch at the secondary school level is sometimes aggravated by school and societal practices which result in premature school leaving and mismatches in the workplace. How deplorable the secondary school situation is in the U.S.A., with Canada likely not much better, is clear from two studies cited by Miller et. al. (1980: 344):

"Proportionally, only one-fifth of secondary students receive the required special education services" and, "few high school aged handicapped students are served by special education programs because they are encouraged to drop out or are excluded from general school activities."

This apparently is still happening south of the border despite the landmark legislation of 1975. If we trust too readily and propitiously in the successful implementation of legislated provisions we better sit up and take notice. Voices in Britain reinforce the need not to encourage or enforce students with special needs to leave school so early that the mismatch with society's expectations will eventually result in even greater problems. According to Nesbit and Karagianis (1980: 11), the commissioners of the British Warnock Report strongly advise that it is counterproductive to force a child with special educational needs to leave school at age 16.

The need for extended educational services on either side of the so-called "school-age" population spectrum demands increasingly our attention. From day-care services to adult upgrading and retraining,

policy makers are increasingly pressured to make additional allowances for publicly-funded extension of educational services.

In a recently released Ontario Ministry of Education discussion paper (1981: 31), it is pointed out that over five million Canadians received less than nine years of basic education. In the province of Ontario this constitutes one-quarter of the total population, a frightening figure in the context of a technological society struggling with inflation and unemployment.

Adequate provision of special education services during the earlier childhood stage of the adults cited in this paper, could conceivably have altered the present-day deplorable state of affairs. Over the long run it might be less costly, both in human and economic terms, to commence those services at the earliest possible date and to reintroduce and continue them during the school-age years whenever and wherever necessary.

To remedy the errors of the past and the present we must guard against future errors and omissions. We must act on several fronts: the ministries, the school boards, the teacher federations and the faculties of education. What applies to ethnic minority students applies to all minority students, but for those in large urban areas, especially faced with the needs of the latter, we must heed the words of the authors of the Research Project (1980: 240) cited earlier:

Without training in the concepts of multiculturalism the likelihood is that the attitudes of ethnocentrism, of Anglo-Canadian

conformity and assimilation as the expected model for new Canadians will continue to exist. Nor can the attitudes, policies and practices change within the institutions unless there is commitment on the part of board officials and willingness on the part of teachers to become actively involved in retraining. Retraining requires the deliberate act of repudiating the ethnocentric melting pot model and the acceptance of ethnic minority cultures as different rather than deficient. (underlinings mine).

Being a twenty-seven-year old "New" Canadian, I take some exception to the implied non-desirability of assimilating with Anglo-Canadian culture. For those who wish to do so there should be no pressure to persuade or prevent them from doing so. On the other hand, I concur with the freedom-of-choice model for those who do not wish to lose their ethnic culture or their French-Canadian or indigenous language and culture, for that matter, in a predominant Anglo-Canadian setting. As long as our diversity maintains and strengthens our unity, it is a unique, fragile, and rare but desirable example to be cherished in the world of nations. Two points are worth noting. What applies to ethnic minorities and economic minorities most definitely applies to our indigenous minorities. The other point is that the deficiency model apparently is still firmly entrenched, resisting and defying an early death.

FUTURE PROMISES AND DIRECTIONS

Last year T.V. Ontario initiated a plan which has become known as the "Muskoka Umbrella Project". Various professional and

volunteer agencies, providing community services to people in the Muskoka area of Central Ontario, came together to share their goals, processes of reaching these goals, and their results. It afforded teachers, social workers, and health workers not only to become more aware of each other but also of the gaps and overlaps that existed in the services they each provided (Ontario Education 1981: 13-14).

The importance for greater interagency and interfaculty cooperation cannot be overemphasized. Not only are the professions isolated from one another, but also professionals, and particularly teachers, are isolated from each other as noted by such authors as Sarason (1970), and Lortie (1975). One can hardly open a professional educational publication without noting a corroboration and re-enforcement of these authors' findings. Some recent excerpts from two Ontario periodicals, (Ontario Education: 14) and (Forum: 79) both illustrate how teachers perceive to be cut off from the active support from fellow professionals. In the first one we find:

Everyone feels isolated. It's difficult
for teachers to get out there to meet others.
We have contact with public health, but contact
with other agencies is spotty.

and in the second one:

Unfortunately, either through alienation
or the isolationist nature of the job, many
teachers do not receive the strokes necessary
to maintain worth and often turn to the
development of a routine that can reduce the
demand for giving.

The latter citation points to a professional malaise which can set in unless those responsible for the professional development of teachers

and the structure of their workplace take some assertive action either to alleviate or remedy such situations.

In order that neither learners nor teachers are perceived in terms of separate, fragmented and disparate entities, teacher education as well as teacher professional development should expect and utilize much more team effort than is presently the case. The isolationist walls that separate teachers from each other, from parents and administrators and from other professionals working in allied fields, must be broken down.

As the CELDIC Report (1970: 411) so perceptively observed:

Many of the problems resulting in a lack of communication and cooperation are a product of the training of professions in isolated schools and faculties.... the limited view of the child develops from his fragmentation into patient, student, ward, or offender.

Faculties of education should take a lead and attempt to break down the barriers that exist between education and other schools and faculties within the walls of academe. They should furthermore attempt to diminish the disadvantages that may accrue to the universities in maintaining too strong and strict an interpretation of ivory tower attitudes which may be offensive to public policy makers as well as counter-productive to the needs of students.

School administrators and teachers on the other hand should more closely work with professionals in health, social work, and welfare. An all too exclusive inward look may be tempting in times of economic and job insecurity but in the long run it is self-

defeating. As the CELDIC Report (1970: 422) reminds us:

The professional associations must also speak out and provide leadership to help bring about the social changes that will prevent the development of many of the problems in the first place. Society has a right to expect this of professionals. If they provide this kind of leadership, their status and role in society will remain unchallenged.

Government funding may encourage this kind of leadership and cooperation through incentive or conditional grants. If the initiative however originates in and is supported by the professions themselves, the results are likely to be more effective and long-lasting than imposed by government mandate or selective granting of funds.

A second and concomitant development is more extensive training and education in special education for all teachers, whether beginning or experienced teachers. With the onset of increased exceptionalities and the recently popular attempt to integrate, as far as this is prudent and possible, disadvantaged and advantaged students with their classmates, we must prepare all teachers to meet the special needs of all children. As Yewchuk et. al. (1980: 76) wrote:

In the 1980's the line between children classified as 'exceptional' and those termed 'normal' will probably become increasingly blurred, as the basic principle of adapting instruction to fit the needs of the child, which now characterizes the education of exceptional children, is increasingly applied to the education of 'normal' children.

The prospect of mandatory mainstreaming makes McMurray (1980: 69) warn us:

Ordinary classroom teachers, often free at present from responsibility for teaching the handicapped -- because such children have been segregated -- will require a variety of support systems at all grade levels and many new skills. Provision for these should precede the proclamation of new legislation.

While agreeing with the latter, one cannot help but smile in the light of present, accelerated practices. Here, as in other cases, the law usually follows rather than precedes present practices.

Partly as a result of newly passed legislation, partly as a result of job insecurity and increasingly complex job requirements, more and more teachers are returning to university for further training in special education. Since 1978 when Ontario faculties of education became practically the sole delivery agencies of such training, enrollment in these programs has more than tripled in one faculty (Kenny: 1981) and quadrupled in another (Korteweg, 1980).

Such an influx, while gratifying and encouraging from the prospect of continued viability for faculties of education and the increased potential knowledge and skills of teachers in this area of expertise, has a less favourable consequence. It is simultaneously challenging and disquieting to contemplate and, what is even more difficult, to deal with the other implications of such a development. Adequate staffing and ensuring high quality programs are two of the most obvious. Particularly in marginal areas where the need is

often greater and more urgent than in more populous regions because of economy-of-scale factors, the problems have at times appeared to be overwhelming.

Compounded by decreased university funding in comparison with other parts of the education sector in Ontario and with other provinces, faculties found themselves expected to offer programs without the resources necessary to deliver. Lakehead University, itself a small, young university in a regional, sparsely populated area the size of France, found itself particularly in a marginal position.

Fortunately the response from the teaching profession, the local and regional boards of education as well as the Ministry of Education was immediate, positive and encouraging. Several experienced teachers and consultants volunteered their services at night and during the summers both on- and off-campus. As a result, a tremendous extension of services could be accomplished.

At the same time we must heed voices from within the university community (Greig, 1981: 22) to respond cautiously and critically to the needs, if not the demands of the teaching profession:

The university should be scrupulously selective in what and to whom it offers its resources.... (it) should resist the temptation to respond uncritically to the alleged needs and insistent demands of pressure groups within the teaching profession.

While attempting to ignore the siren voices of alleged needs, the faculty at the same time has a mandate of professional responsibility

to the real and urgent needs of the region it is called upon to serve. This summer, the Lakehead Faculty of Education, in close cooperation with the two Lakehead school boards and in conjunction with the Lakehead Board of Education in the context of a community oriented summer outreach program, commences its second unique summer program in special education.

Students with special needs, predominantly from the city of Thunder Bay but also some from as far away as Red Lake and McDiarmid attend the summer school. During the three-week practicum session, an integral part of the program, they receive continuing help from teachers enrolled to practise the skills of providing special programs and practices to students with special needs.

The response of professionals, some of whom serve as guest lecturers or come from cognate professions, as well as the response from the students and their parents have been extremely positive. Hopefully this example of interfaculty and interagency cooperation will serve as a model throughout the region in the various smaller communities of the region. Apparently this is already the case to a considerable extent in Fort Frances, Ontario. Much has been achieved, but, as was seen from recent developments, we cannot allow ourselves to be deluded in thinking that the task is accomplished.

A third development we have to face and tackle is the provision and delivery of adequate support personnel and services. Last, but not least, it again is of vital importance in the marginal areas.

Wide variations have existed and continue to exist from one educational jurisdiction to another as observed by Goguen and Leslie (1980: 22):

.....variability across and within provinces on matters of legislation and funding has resulted in wide variance in development of comprehensive special educational services and policy statements.

Ontario and other provinces with a large northern hinterland as well as the Territories, must establish special units for the provision of support services in those regions. Long-distance education is helpful but by itself it is insufficient. The least policy makers and implementors can do is to ensure that travelling resource teams and teachers are regularly available to schools along a northern railroad track or within the flight path network of bush planes.

In addition the provision of adequate housing and facilities, both for teachers and consultants is a necessity without which not much can be anticipated or accomplished.

SUMMARY

Newly passed legislation and greater assertion of rights by minority groups have made the provision of special services to meet the needs of all students, specifically the advantaged and disadvantaged, a societal expectation. Professionals, within and without the educational community, can no longer afford to ignore

this demand. By learning from past inadequate policies and practices, educational decision-makers are now in a position to regain public esteem and confidence.

Past and even recent practices behind the classroom doors have fallen short of contemporary, let alone of future expectations. Only a concerted, coordinated team effort will regain the public trust. As long as those who know what is best for all students in cooperation with parents, guardians and students fulfill their new responsibilities sensitively, diligently, and competently, this trust will not only be regained but maintained well into the future.

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